Wordsworth's Poetical Theory

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—Wordsworth's Poetical Theory—

It has been acknowledged by many critics that Wordsworth is one of the chief glories of English poetry and that he has exercised a greater, purer, healthier and more elevating influence than any other poet since Milton and Shakspere. From the language generally used regarding this improvement, one would expect to be conscious of a great and sudden change in passing from eighteenth century to nineteenth century poetry. But not so. A great and worthy change did occur but it was an easy, gradual transition; indeed a sort of quiet evolution of new things, not a sudden fierce upheaval and distruction of old things as worthless rubbish and a corresponding abnormal growth and triumphant reconstruction of new material. Nevertheless, because we cannot put our finger on the exact moment when it occurred, we must not, as is sometimes done, ignore the fact altogether.

The grand Anne style of literature gradually disappeared. The prose writers were the chief literary agents of this

transformation. Novelists and romanticists had educated the public taste for new subjects and a new style; for subjects with more varied and deeper human interests; and a style less condensed and elaborate but more free and discursive. Pope's readers had had no taste for this class of literature, but now the public had become acquainted ~~to it~~ with it and thus was prepared for Scott and Wordsworth.

Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, in 1798, is a great land mark in the history of poetry, because it aroused people to a consciousness of the change that had taken place and compelled critics to define their position. The Preface and the volume which accompanied it we will consider at length, but let us first examine the first poems written by him before the Ballads. In these early poems we shall realize how gradual was the transition from the poetical style of his predecessors, notwithstanding the revolutionary nature of the famous Preface. The growth of his poetical style can better be traced in these than in the Prelude, which is Wordsworth's poetical biography, because in the Prelude it is the gradual growth of his mind, of his feelings and of his

impassioned love for nature, which is narrated; not the development of his poetic art, of his aims and methods as an artist; and it is these facts which are interesting if we desire to view him in his proper relation to his predecessors.

What then were the circumstances which cooperated with unborn genius to make him the poet he was? The Prelude answers; Nature — the mountains and the mists, the leaping cataracts and valleys where he lived in his youth. Hear him describe his feelings in the presence of nature in his school-boy days at Hawkshead:

"I would walk alone
Under the quiet stars, and at that time
Have felt whate'er there is of power in sound
To breathe an elevated mood, by form
Or image unprofaned; and I would stand,
If the night blackened with coming storm,
Beneath some rock, listening to notes that are
The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
Or make their dim abode in the distant winds.
Thence did I drink the visionary power;
And dreams not profitless those fleeting moods
Of shadowy exultation; not for this,
That they are kindred to our purer mind
And intellectual life; but that the soul,
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense

Of possible sublimity, whereto
With growing faculties she does aspire,
With faculties still growing feeling still
That whatsoever point they gain, they get
Have something to pursue."

What now so keenly awakened the poets sensibilities to the glories and beauties of Nature? What caused him to enjoy walking ~~xxx~~ alone under the stars, standing and listening to distant thunder? What influence governed the form of expression, of those things which he saw and felt? The Prelude is silent, it merely chronicles his joy and rapture in such scenes. When, however, we turn to his early poems we can easily see his descent from the preceding poets.

The "Evening Walk" and "Descriptive Sketches" were published in 1793. Commencing many years later on the couplet:

Add fronting the bright west yon oak entwines
Its darkening boughs and leaves in stronger lines-
he says; "This is feebly and imperfectly expressed ×××××× but the moment was important in my poetical history; for I date from it my consciousness of the infinite ~~x~~ variety of natural appearances, which had been unnoticed by the poets of any age or country so far as I was acquainted with them; and I made a resolution to supply, in some degree, the

deficiency. I could not at that time have been over fourteen years of age. We thus find that mingled with this disinterested delight in the contemplation of nature was a youthful ambition and joy of having found an untrodden path. Indeed, read almost any passage from these early poems and see how easy it is to detect his early poetical masters.

"Take for example the following:

"Once man, entirely free, alone and wild,
Was blest as free — for he was nature's child.
He, all superior but his God disdained,
Walked none restraining and by none restrained,
Confessed no law but what his reason taught,
Did all he wished, and wished but what he ought.
As man in his primeval dower arrayed
The image of his glorious Sire displayed.
Even so by faithful nature guarded, here
The traces of primeval man appear;
The simple dignity no forms debase;
The eye sublime and manly lion grace:
The stars of morn, of trusts alone the lord,
His took the prizes nor neglects his sword:
Nor taught by that to feel his rights prepared
With this the blessings he enjoys to guard."

like Pope This sounds very much ~~exceedingly~~ like Pope. There can be no doubt ~~as to whom~~ who was Wordsworth's model. The effort after balance and condensed expression is evident although it is not executed with nearly

the perfection and terseness of the ~~Popian~~ Pope couplet. So we might select a great number of passages in his earlier works and recognize Pope, Goldsmith or other predecessors as his models.

Wordsworth published the Lyrical Ballads in 1798, and when these are read alone, apart from his other poems, it is easy to understand why such a shout of derision arose against them, as well as why they impressed so deeply those who were not repelled by their strangeness. In them, Wordsworth presented his personality and it was markedly different from any that had ever been presented hitherto. His humor was of a strange kind, his seriousness was found in strange places, and both were yet more strangely intermixed. Subjects which the public considered too vulgar and common for poetry, were treated so pathetically and so grotesquely as to cause people to laugh at the attempt to move their tender feelings. There was, however, one poem in the volume, at least, in which a fresh and beautiful theme was handled with such power and feeling that even the most determined critics could not remain insensible to its presence in English literature — The beautiful "Lines

written about Tintern Abbey." If all had been like this, the acknowledgement of his greatness would have been immediate. It is characteristic of the loftiest side of Wordsworth's genius. In it, he struck for the first time, the note which was to draw all men after him.

It will be observed, however, that both the rhythm of this poem and the feelings expressed, are developments from the gentle Cowper. His early tendency to imitate Pope had ceased as he realized that of all the insipid verses, which the imitators of that poet produced were poetry, there was no use ~~to try~~ in writing poetry at all.

Cowper, Burns and Crabbe had been leaders in a reaction which asserted that poetry depends on emotion and not on polish; that it consists ~~xxx~~ precisely in those things which frigid imitators lack. There was, however, a fire and majesty in Wordsworth's lines for which we look in vain in these poets. Wordsworth's torch was kindled at Cowper's tender light and as poetry became to him the expression of his own deep and tender feelings, he rebelled against rhetoric and unreality.

What then particularly aroused

Wordsworth in rebellion against the canons of criticism generally accepted in his time was undoubtedly the style of diction that they considered indispensible to line poetry. Wordsworth held that the indespensible feature of poetry was that its object should be to awaken the mind from lethargy of custom and to reveal those truths which could not be perceived without the meditation of the poet. The poet as he describes him is a man exalted, rejoicing more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; and hence qualified to act as an interpreter of nature. He held that the subject of poetry should be drawn from objects and incidents of every day life, and that the language of poetry should as far as possible resemble the language of the peasantry.

This theory struck at his strongly marked protest against these old poetic forms. He had heard Darwin's "Botanic Garden" ardently admired, which he knew to be without soul. He saw that the mode of poetic expression employed by all other poets of his generation as well as Darwin was false and gaudy and in looking back over the earlier poetry of the century he found the germs of the same diction in Pope

and Johnson. Instead of reasoning that the defect might spring from the natural corruption of some true principle of art, he inferred that it arose from a false ideal of composition consciously adopted by the poet. And being of a combative nature, his violent dislikes led him to agree that true poetry should be composed on a system exactly opposite to the style, which he condemned.

We now turn to the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, which contain his poetical theory and a defence of his views. Comparatively few at the present day have actually read and studied Wordsworth's famous Preface although it is continually referred to as a revolutionary proclamation against the established taste of the eighteenth century. For one, who has read Wordsworth's original Preface, hundreds have read Coleridge's brilliant criticism. Now while Coleridge's criticism of his friend's theory proceeded avowedly "on the assumption that Wordsworth had been rightly interpreted", yet we cannot help but believe that it was not so treated. Although some claim that Wordsworth's Preface had little influence on poetry, yet this little, if little it is, is of

great importance and it is desirable on account of this influence as well as the celebrity of the affair that Wordsworth's exact position should be made clear.

Wordsworth, in the beginning of or introduction to the Preface of the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads, says; "It" (that is the former edition) "was published as an experiment, which I hoped might be of some use to ascertain how far, ~~xxx~~ by fitting to metrical arrangement, a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure, and the quantity of pleasure, may be imparted, which a poet may rationally endeavor to impart." He also says, by way of apology for the theory, which he knew should have been stated in the first edition; "Several of my friends are anxious for the success of these poems, from a belief, that if the views with which they were composed were realized, a class of poetry would be produced well adopted to ~~xxx~~ interest mankind permanently and not unimportant in the quality and the ~~xxx~~ multiplicity of its moral relations. And on this account, they have advised me to prefix a systematic defence of the theory, upon which the poems were written!"

If the first edition of the "Ballads" had incensed the critics, the second simply fanned their wrath into flames. There was no longer any doubt but that Wordsworth had intentionally written "The Idiot Boy", "Goody Blake" and "Peter Bell" in the manner in which they existed. They could no longer regard them as simple, yet flagrant mistakes, for Wordsworth himself declared that he had intended to write them just as they were and now that he should try to defend them, was beyond endurance. Nevertheless if Wordsworth had omitted his Preface and called out about a hundred lines from the more trivial places, the new departure would have been received gladly.

Let us now direct our attention to the theory itself. Wordsworth said at the very beginning of it; "The principle object then proposed in these poems," (Lyrical Ballads) "was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them throughout as far as possible in a selection of language really used by men and at the same time to throw over them a certain coloring of the imagination whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and further and above all to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them truely but not ostentatiously the

primary laws of our nature; chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement." It has generally been supposed that by the language selected as being "really used by men", Wordsworth meant colloquial language and above all for poetical purposes the language of the rustics, and inasmuch as the vocabulary of the peasant class is ~~extremely~~ extremely limited, the thought has been decided as preposterous. But in reality Wordsworth did not mean to propose any thing so absurd although he did say that:

"Humble and rustic life was generally chosen because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart found a better soil in which they can maintain their maturity, are less under restraint and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings can exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life generate from those elementary feelings and from necessary character of rural occupation and are more easily comprehended and are more durable; and lastly because, in that condition the passions of man are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language of two of these men has been adopted

(purified indeed from what appears to be its real defects, from all rational and lasting causes of dislike and disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because from their rank in society and the parentness and narrow circle of their intercourse being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expression."

There can be no doubt but that this part of Wordsworth's theory as generally understood, — is overstrained and that it could not but be expected that it would be the recipient of easy ridicule. Wordsworth did not, however, argue that all poetry should be constructed from such material nor indeed if his words be taken literally, that any should. It was not the language of the peasant as such any more than the language of the courtier or philosopher as such, which seemed admirable to him; it was the permanent and passionate speech of man wherever it is to be found, which he sought after; and in the speech of the common people. Wordsworth believed there was more of such stuff to be retained and less matter to be rejected as belonging to merely local or accessional uses than in the speech of over-cultivated and artificial refinement. And surely no one can doubt the truth of

Wordsworth's views on this phase of the subject.

However Wordsworth may have failed to convey his precise meaning on this subject, yet it cannot be truthfully said that his practice and theory were not in agreement with his words rightly interpreted. To us of the present day, there are few characteristics of Wordsworth's poetry more refreshing when we return to it from contemporary writings than its simplicity and yet its entire freedom from all appearance of condescension. Wordsworth neither studied the persons nor repeats the phrases of the shepherd, of the village schoolmaster, of the college madman, or of the peasant Patriarch with an air of sentimental or humorous superiority but always with genuine sympathy.

This part of Wordsworth's theory may then be regarded as being restrained only in expression not in meaning. If, however, any reader will not regard it as such, he must remember, to do Wordsworth justice, that he did not propose to use bare incidents without a coloring of imagination, and that the ~~did not~~ poet's words were to be a selection metrically arranged; the selection to be dictated by the feelings to be expressed, and the feelings to be dictated by the poet's sensibility.

Coleridge understands the words of Wordsworth as purporting that the proper diction

for poetry in general consists altogether in language taken from the mouths of men in real life, — a language which actually constitutes the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feeling. But as we have shown, the assumption is not warranted: First the Preface was not a statement of a general theory of poetry but of a plan upon which certain poems had been composed at the instance of certain friends. Coleridge too appears to declare that Wordsworth meant to take his language from the most degraded classes, from the ignorant and uncultured laborers as it were, and even compares the language of Wordsworth seemingly advocated both as to thought and expression, to that of the brute creation. Coleridge, however, does not view Wordsworth rightly. All Wordsworth meant by his praise of rustic language was to point out its simplicity and not its lack of polish and culture. Simplicity alone was what he admired in it and he admired it whether found in a philosopher or in a rustic. It is worth while to observe that the most effective parts of Chaucer and Spenser as well as other great poets are almost always expressed in pure, simple, intelligible language and it matters not whether it is the simplicity of a Plato or of a noble-minded rustic, it is simplicity still and of the character for which Wordsworth argued.

of his poems

He wished the language to be such that not only the educated but all classes could be interested and profited by them; and surely the simplicity that can do this, so long as it is not vulgar and trivial, is a commendable feature and not a defect. Who could desire that the tender tribute Wordsworth paid to Lucy should be full of classical allusions and rhetorical flectunicalities? Who would not rather read these tender lays to a pure, simple lovely maiden such as we can see around us, with the unassuming name of Lucy than the most learned poems to Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon, the son of Atreus and Thyestes? Who is there but would rather hear a poet talk of the scenes dear to him in the language he himself would have used than to hear him praise Mt Pangaeus or the river Phasis in language above his comprehension? This is the simplicity for which Wordsworth was striving in opposition to the learned and gorgeous diction of his predecessors.

Wordsworth did not, however, sanction vulgarity or lowness of expression. Hear Wordsworth himself reply to such a charge from Coleridge: "It cannot, however, be insensible to the present outcry against the triviality and meanness both of language and

thought, which some of my contemporaries have occassionally introduced into their metrical composition; and I acknowledge that this defect, where it exists, is more dishonorable to the writer's character than false refinement or arbitrary innovation. From such verse the Poems in this volume" (Lyrical Ballads) "will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference that each of them has a worthy purpose." Whether Wordsworth always succeeded in removing triviality from his poems either by a worthy purpose or otherwise, we will discuss later.

We must now discuss this particular phase of Wordsworth's theory with a quotation from Ruskin; "Wordsworth's distinctive work was a war with pomp and pretense, and a display of the majesty of simple feelings and humble hearts." [8]

This preferrment of Wordsworth for rustic or simple language was but a part of his theory. The main thesis of his Preface was that poetry had no special language distinct from that of ordinary life or prose; in other words, that the language of passion, of powerful feeling is the same whether written in verse or prose; that it is possible and proper to write poetry without using other words than what would be found in the best prose. Speaking of his style as shown in the Lyrical

Ballads he says: "The reader will find that personification of abstract ideas rarely occurs in these volumes; and are utterly rejected as an ordinary device to elevate the style and to elevate it above prose. × × × ×

Nowhere will always be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction × × × × × × If in a poem there should be found a series of lines, or even a single line, in which language, though naturally arranged, and according to strict laws of ~~metre~~ meter, does not differ from that of prose, there is a numerous class of critics, who, when they stumble upon these prosaisms, as they call them, imagine that they have made a notable discovery and exult over the Poet as over a man ignorant of his profession. Now these men would establish a canon of criticism which the reader will conclude he must utterly reject, if he wishes to be pleased with these volumes. And it would be a more easy task to prove to him that not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found ~~to~~ be strictly the language of

prose, when prose is well written."

Wordsworth after making the above statements quotes a passage from Gray, who, of all men, blends in a separate poetic diction and shows that a large part of it even differs in no respect from prose. Going further, he then makes the statement which gives so much offense to Coleridge: "It may be safely affirmed that there neither is nor can be any essential difference between language of prose and metrical composition." Are these views correct? surely you say the order and selection of words and construction of sentences are different. Coleridge argues that there is, as if Wordsworth had denied it; although it is most explicitly clear from the context that when he said there was no essential difference between the language of prose and poetry, he meant as regards words plain and figurative and not the structure and order of words not the composition and arrangement of words or as Coleridge says "the ordinance of words". Coleridge says if Wordsworth meant this, he was uttering a truism and interpreting Wordsworth in this way his friendly critic has no difficulty in showing that neither in his own poetry nor in any poetry is the style identical with that of prose. although Coleridge

could not then with pieceve regard charge Wordsworth with stating a truism, he thoughtlessly charges him with a greater fault, namely that of stating an absurdity. But strange to say, it is a truism which even Wordsworth himself realized for he says; "And if in what I am about to say, it shall appear ~~that~~ I ~~am~~ ~~like~~ to some that my labor is unnecessary and that I am like a man fighting a battle without any enemies, such persons may be reminded that whatever be the language outwardly holden by men, a practical faith in the opinion which I am wishing to establish, is almost unknown."

"The true question" says Coleridge, "must be whether there are not modes of expression, a construction and an order of sentences which are in their fit and natural places in a serious prose composition but would be disproportionate and heterogeneous in metrical poetry: and vice versa whether in the language of a serious poem there may not be an arrangement both of words and of sentences and a use and selection of (what are called) figures of speech, both as to their kind, their frequency and their occasions which in a subject of equal weight, would be vicious and alien in correct and manly prose. I contend that in both cases the usefulness of each for the other pre-

quently will and ought to exist." Coleridge immediately after making this statement proceeds through over two more pages to argue this view, "fighting a battle without enemies," although he refered Wordsworth to be one; for it is impossible for any one with even ordinary intelligence, who reads Wordsworth's Preface with care, and who grapples with his stiff and condensed exposition and interprets it with reference to the controversy in which it was incident, without feeling that he never thought of denying what Coleridge so minutely affirmed against him. Such a reader is compelled to feel that Wordsworth abstained from insisting upon the difference between prose and poetry in point of arrangement only because he regarded it as a truism, that when he speaks of there being no essential difference between the language of prose and poetry, he was referring to the words only. His language continually implies that he fully realized the distinction between prose and poetry as emphasized by Coleridge and the wonder is how he could have been so misjudged. He discusses at length why it is that meter adds to the reader's pleasure and develops in brief, the very theory of origin and effect of meter that Coleridge advances. "Various causes" says he, "might be ~~[illegible]~~ pointed

out why, when the style is manly and the subject of some importance, words metrically arranged will long continue to impart so great a pleasure to mankind." He later speaks of the "continual and regular impulses of surprise" which result "from the metrical arrangement." Wordsworth never even thought of affirming that the poetic order of words must of necessity be the prose order although he contended it might be and yet loose none of the charms of poetry. Wordsworth has certainly proven this idea in some of his loveliest poems — in "The Solitary Reaper" and the poems to Lucy especially.

The fact that Coleridge labored most brilliantly to establish against Wordsworth was that there are figures of speech which would be in place in prose and out of place in "correct and manly prose." But even here Coleridge was battling an imaginary enemy for Wordsworth did not deny even this in his Preface although he did not with sufficient care guard himself against being charged with having done so for he was far from repudiating elevation of style in poetry. "If, said he," the poet's subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally lead upon fit occasion lead him to passions, the language of which

if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated and abound with metaphors and figures!" But no "foreign splendors" should be interwoven "with that" the passion naturally suggests" and "where the passions are of a milder character, the style should be subdued and temperate." What Wordsworth then wished to establish, as is clearly seen, was the simple truth that what is false unreal, affected, bombastic or nonsensical in prose is not the less so in poetry. If the statements of Wordsworth in his Preface had not been sufficiently explicit, his comments on the passage from Gray should have been sufficient to show that what he really objected to was the habitual employment of certain conventional figures of speech which had dropped out of prose style and had come to be regarded as the exclusive colors of poetic diction. There was no greater heresy in Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction.

The reception the first edition of the ballads had received, together with Wordsworth's paradoxial and antagonistic nature, caused him to express these simple views in terms which partook of the nature of a polemic's, and which were received as such. He told the public with lofty anger and indignation but

possibly with too much arrogance, that its taste was corrupt and that if they wished to enjoy his poems, they must give up their unnatural proclivities of taste. All this was provoked by the open prosaisms of these Lyrical Ballads. He carried the war into the enemies country with the angry retort; "Cleanse yourselves of your gaudy glossy meaningless conventional poeticisms and you will be able to enjoy my prosaisms."

We must now notice briefly what in one way is a minor feature of Wordsworth's theory and yet in another word is a greater feature of his writing; namely his choice of subjects and his method of developing his poems. This portion of his theory was put forward to defend himself against the charge of triviality and insignificance in his subjects and incidents. It is necessary to notice this briefly else, as Wordsworth himself said, his poetry cannot be thoroughly enjoyed unless you follow the course of his imagination in developing it. Mere Reading will not do. The reader must feel his imagination accompanied by that that of the poet, as a counterpart. Being accused of choosing trivial incidents and subjects in his Ballads Wordsworth replied that "the feeling therein developed, gives importance to the action and

situation and the action and situation to the feeling." Inasmuch as "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," the poet's business is to study "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement;" and in proportion as the succession of ideas in his poetry obeys these natural laws of association, his feeling is real poetry. But in as much as the poet is bound to study "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" and as he can do this only in his own mind, he must study how his imagination is affected by events within his own experience. Again in as much as not every image that the excited mind conjures up, is necessarily poetical, the poet must select and modify them for a particular purpose — that of giving immediate pleasure. The poet's choice of what his imagination evolves being thus restricted, shou should be proceed in choosing his subjects and incidents? Wordsworth answers, that in as much as "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling: it takes its origin from emotion, recollected in tranquility. the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually ~~disappears~~ disappears and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of com

temptation is gradually produced and does itself actually exist in the mind."
The difference between this "kindred" feeling or "emotion" and the original one is as I understand from the context that from the later the personal ~~exp~~ equation, as we might call it and all feelings that are not pleasurable, have been removed by an unconscious process.

These facts concerning the evolution of Wordsworth's poems explain the strength as well as the imperfections of Wordsworth's poems. He wrote chiefly for himself and without much regard to the effect to be produced on his readers. When his feelings were satisfied by the work of his imagination, he had little solicitude about communicating the same satisfaction to others. In as much as his life was that of a solitary student moving within a narrow circle of interests, it cannot be expected that all that interested him would interest every one; of this, he was aware but it did not influence his practice for he says; "I am sensible that my associations must have sometimes been particular instead of general, and that consequently, giving to things a false importance, I may sometimes have written upon unworthy subjects × × × × × hence I have no doubt that in some instances feelings even of the the

ludicrous, may be given to my readers by expressions which appeared to me tender and pathetic."

Having discussed the theory of Wordsworth, it now remains for us to observe the workings of the theory in his poems. It is necessary to remark at once, however, that from a very superficial study of the theory itself and from a very much more thorough study of Coleridge's brilliant criticism, most students of poetry usually charge the poet with a great inconsistency between his theory and his practise. Believing that the interpretation of Wordsworth's theory which I have given is more in accordance with his views than the majority of such interpretations, I shall take the stand that Wordsworth in the main, at least, is consistent in practise with his theory; and that many of the faults found in the Lyrical Ballads are not attributable to his theory so much as to his youthfulness.

Among the effects of his youthfulness, I would name an often mistaken judgment in determining important incidents, too great an indulgence to conventionality, at times too great a delight in mischief and too conscientious a view of his

own duty as a part of reforming the public taste. Ah you say but Keats and Shelley had completed their work before the age of Wordsworth was when the Lyrical Ballads appeared. All true enough, but neither of these had a great philosophy of the world. They wrote music; Wordsworth was to be a philosopher and his philosophy was but forming itself into a grand whole during the first thirty years of his life.

If I have rightly interpreted Wordsworth's theory, we can not but say that his practice was in harmony with it. Very seldom do we find a form, which is not simple both in thought, language and expression. "Lodonia", which is perhaps the farthest removed from his theory, yet contains a simplicity of feeling and expression. We can discover but none of conventional forms of figurative language used simply to enable the production to be called a poem. These figures and forms of expression, he used, was a demand of his own emotions not of the critics of the age.

That his view is correct is shown by the fact that those of his poems, which are most appreciated, conform most exactly to his theory rightly in-

terpreted. Take the poems, which reveal "Lucy"— she of whom Nature would make a lady of her own"— she, who "dwelt among untrodden ways beside the springs of Dove"— the most refined, yet the most simple of all poetry. Whether she was a real person or only an imagination, no one can tell; but that the little casket of gems in which her gentle name is enshrined is as pure and divine as the stars themselves even Mrs. Oliphant can say. Here the poet surely arrived at his aim of producing the highest effect by the simplest means. In reading it, we are filled with a penetrating sadness devoid either of hope or passion for she is dead before we even so much as hear her.

By the side of "Lucy" stands "Matthew" the schoolmaster whose name on a village tablet calls forth the poet's tenderest exclamation;

"Thou soul of God's best earthly mould:
Thou happy soul: and can it be
that these two words of glittering gold
Is all that must remain of thee?"

"The April Morning" and "The Fountain" are so beautiful and simple that the mere thought of them is like a strain of music. The suggestion of a noble

human creature. "A man of Mirth", one whose very tears" were tears of light, the dew of gladness" yet by whom also the mood of "Still and sedious thought" was "felt with speech so profound" is such that no one else in so short a space could have given. If Wordsworth had written no more, these alone would have insured him immorality.

Indeed as Wordsworth insinuated, so simple was the motive that unless the fact taken by imagination was itself delightful to you; unless you are caught up with it and transported as he himself was, you are left to feel that there has been much to do about nothing. As an instance of this I could site that most perfect poem "The Solitary Reaper" — A simple outpouring of thought — a sublime but simple emotion in beautiful language. Some say he never dreamed of his theory in it but be that as it may, no poem he wrote is more in harmony with it. Take his great poem the "Ode to Duty." Observe what a splendor of imagination he invests in it. To what heights of ecstasy does he lift the simple feeling? These poems as well as many others are written in exact conformance to his

theory. I do not believe, however, that he tried to harmonize them to his theory but rather that they were the unconscious working of this theory. When he tried to make his poems conform to the letter of his theory, we have such poems as "Peter Bell", "Harry Gill" and "Simon Lee". Although these poems are generally selected as illustrating his theory, they do not; they are rather the extreme of a not yet fully developed theory and of a mistaken judgment. It is evident that Wordsworth was at first only in part conscious of his deeper instinctive tendencies in writing the Lyrical Ballads; it is evident that he only gradually discovered his full purpose. From the first indeed, he had a crude notion of this theory of poetic diction but the expression of this theory was modified as he reviewed his own practise as is shown by the changes in the different editions of the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads!

There can be no doubt but that to begin a poem like "We are Seven" as it began in the first edition, "A little Child dear brother Jim" adds triviality; again there can be no doubt but that to speak of "a household tub like one of those, which women use to

wash their clothes," is ridiculous but Wordsworth did not then realize the fact or he would have applied his own criticism for he opposes both the trivial and the ridiculous in his theory. That the passages were in reality purposely introduced instead of accidently, I cannot believe. The same is true of the "Idiot Boy", "Goody Blake" and "Harry Gill." His theory in these poems was correct but in his attempt to observe it he unconsciously carried it to the extreme.

In his attempt in "Idiot Boy" to demonstrate that the feeling of Betty Foy for her lost boy were as deep and tragical and as worthy of elevation as those of a queen, he did realize that the choice of the colloquial familiarity of treatment produced a jocular rather than a serious meaning, and that the absolute insignificance of the incident and the attempt to give grace and dignity to the story destroyed completely its effects as an exposition of nature.

After a complete study then of Wordsworth's poetical theory, we are led to believe that he generally conformed to his theory when rightly understood and that those poems, which have

them generally regarded as conforming to his theory, do not; but rather are mistaken judgments and unconscious extremes, while the rest of his poems agree with his theory and stamps him as the most important literary influence of ~~the~~ age.

Wordsworth's Poetical
Theory.
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